

THE MYSTERIOUS WAYS OF

WANG FOO

By SIDNEY C. PARTRIDGE

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VIII.—The Incense Burner

"Ching ying tak foh! Ching ying tak foh!" (Make it a thousand dollars more!) Make it a thousand dollars more! shrieked out old Sam the prospector as he stretched out his long arm toward the center of the table and deposited there, in front of the censor of the game, a fat roll of Hong Kong bank notes. The sleek and oily receiver of money took the roll from the gambler's hand, but before he said a word in acknowledgment of its receipt he looked at the gambler, bit before him, examined its surface carefully through his round horn spectacles, held it up to the light, peered through it—as if suspicious of its interior structure—rubbed it between his thumb and long-nailed fingers and then deposited it in an old-fashioned iron chest which he held securely between his knees.

"Sam hai ching cheng tak foh!" (Sam truly adds a thousand more!), he cried to a post-marked crimped lending over an open account book at his side, and the latter promptly noted down the fact in the column under the name of the brave and reckless Sam. "Come now, Hop Hoy," he said, addressing the central figure of an interested group on the other side of the ring, "where's that valiant spirit of your ancestors of which you and your family are always talking? You're surely not going to allow a bean-cake to balk a jump of courage that way, are you?" At this exhortation of native wit the assembled crowd broke out into loud and good-natured laughter, recognizing at once the pointed allusion to the fact that the party named was a dealer in sugar, while his opponent was a shipper of the ever-popular bean-cake.

Now, ridicule—even in its most good-natured form—being something which the Chinese mind cannot tolerate, the remarks of the cashier, especially his clever references to the ancestors, at once called forth from the excited Hop Hoy the retort, "By the noble spirits of my ancestors, I will sweeten the mixture with twelve hundred dollars more!" And, putting the action to the word, he drew forth from his sleeve the requisite amount, which disappeared in regular order through the opening in the cover of the iron chest.

These two were the latest wagers of the evening on the spirited contest being waged between two local champions of the manly art in a carefully guarded cellar some ten feet or more beneath the surface of one of Hong Kong's crowded alleys. Of course there were smaller bets, even as low as the twenties and the tens and the fives, but no copper or brass was admitted in the monetary transactions of this most aristocratic club, even the current Mexican silver having been tabooed and the minimum limit placed at a five-dollar note.

"We are all ready for the next and final round of the night," said the master of the bet, as a more money seemed forthcoming. "Whenever His Majesty shall give the word," addressing a pompous and brutal-faced individual who occupied the most prominent seat in the circle.

The "King of the Contest," as he was known to all the patrons of the establishment, bowed in acknowledgment and replied, "In accordance with the traditions of our ancestors, we will first pay our tribute to Tuk Yok Wung, the third ruler of Hades, who presides over all the gods of the cellars. Let the candles and the incense be lighted and the wine and rice cakes be presented."

"It is already done as His Majesty has commanded," replied Sung Ling, who acted in the capacity of door-keeper and acolyte.

"Then let the honorable trial of strength begin!" announced the King in his most majestic tones, "and may the august Deities of Heaven decide between the merits of 'Spotted Back' and 'Yellow Legs'!" (Loud cheers from the backers of these two champions greeted the royal remarks.) Are the red lacquer clamps firm beneath the waist—

"They are! They are!" shrieked the room in one great chorus.

"Then all is ready, GO!" and with the word, "Spotted Back" and "Yellow Legs," stripped of every rag of clothing and held only around the waist by the clamps of the polished red lacquer, flew at each other and, grappling in an awful struggle for life or death, seemed to be trying to tear each other limb from limb, as they revolved around in the narrow arena—not of boards or of sand, but, as always in these contests in China—of baked and polished porcelain.

The battle was brief but very bloody and in less than five short minutes "Spotted Back" was lying a crumpled mass upon the floor and the conquering "Yellow Legs," who had jumped upon his victim and was kicking out his feet, remaining sparks of life beneath the waist—

"Well, out with it, then; who connected the yarn?"

"It is no yarn at all, Mr. Inspector," replied the Missionary, "and very seriously, 'it is the testimony of a tried and trusted assistant of mine, whom I would trust as soon as I would the oldest European in the Colony.'"

"Listen! Coming down from Canton on the night boat last week, he occupied a cabin next to two travelers who kept up a running conversation until after midnight, and the partition being full of cracks, he couldn't help overhearing a good deal that they said."

"Eaves-dropping as usual! My gracious, the curiosity of this people!"

"Well, sir, you know Europeans sometimes have a little curiosity themselves; but to proceed, he kept hearing phrases like these: 'They certainly fought like demons! The place was packed with their supporters! They were clinched in a death grip! They actually had to pull them apart! etc. Now, if that doesn't indicate fighting of the most brutal kind, what does?'

"It certainly looks that way, Mr. Smalltree, but there isn't a word there to indicate that the fight took place on English soil—it might have been in any country town in China."

"Wait a moment, please, that isn't all! I am just coming to the important point. They also said, several times, 'What if the devil's patrol had broken in upon them and caught them in the act?'

"You are quite sure they said that?"

"Quite positive, sir, and you know what phrase refers to, do you not?"

"I believe my Department is honored with that title," replied the English officer, with a smile.

"Yes, sir, and it could never refer to any other place than just this Colony, because in Macao, which is Portuguese, they wouldn't have to 'break in'."

So all that sort of thing right out in public and the police generally look on and rather enjoy the scene. It was here and nowhere else.

Inspector Wallace of the Hong Kong Police was sitting quietly in his office overlooking the blue waters of the harbor, when the boy on duty appeared at the door with the card of the Rev. Herbert Smalltree of the Union Mission and after presenting it to his Chief, was told to show the visitor in.

"Mr. Inspector," began the Missionary, "I have accepted the proffered seat and had declined the equally courteous proffered cigar. I come to see you this afternoon, because my conscience bids me do so. I have hesitated for some time, because I dislike to stir up any trouble—especially with the Police Department, for which I have the greatest respect—but I feel that the time has now come when it is my religious duty, both as a Christian man and a resident of this community, to report to you that a very serious breach of the law is going on continually here, right under your very eyes and without any apparent effort being made by the authorities to stop it."

"Indeed! Well, that is rather a serious charge against us, Mr. Smalltree; may I ask to what you refer, sir?"

"I refer to prize-fighting, Mr. Wallace, and prize-fighting of the most degrading and brutal kind. I spoke to my friend Lord Dubhine of Aberdeen—who, as you perhaps know, is visiting in the Colony—about it yesterday and he promised to bring it to the attention of Government House, when he called there to-day."

"I am sorry that you did not report it to me, sir, before you allowed it to reach the ears of the Governor, because it may make serious and quite unnecessary complications. Tell me now exactly the facts as you know them, being very particular, please, about names and places. Just when and where did this 'prize-fight,' as you call it, take place? You have made a charge against this department now, sir—"

continued the Inspector in a much more serious tone, "I demand that you produce your proofs and make it good, or else apologize for it and withdraw it."

"That is just the trouble, sir," replied the Rev. Smalltree, "we do not know the exact place or even the exact date."

"You do not know the place nor the date?"

"Unfortunately not, sir; all we know is that the fight took place and that a number of similar ones have taken place recently—and that up to the present time not a single line has appeared in the public papers of any attempt on the part of the police to arrest the participants or stop it."

"We do not publish all the transactions of the Department in the public papers, you know, until we think it wise and expedient to do so. Publicity of this kind sometimes acts as a very serious bar to getting justice done in the case. Where do you imagine these fights take place?"

"Well, sir, when my attention was first called to them, I thought they probably took place in some native enclosure just outside the international boundary, but I now am quite certain that they are being carried on in some secret spot right here in the Colony."

"Quite impossible! Utterly absurd, sir!" exclaimed the Inspector as he brought his closed fist down with an emphatic blow upon the office table.

"There isn't a secret hiding place on all the islands of Hong Kong that could possibly hold a crowd gathered for a prize-fight. I know they have their little 'rabbit-tunnels' as I call them, where they burrow under the ground and dig out a little hole for two or three to gamble in—we smoke 'em out of these every now and then—but the idea of their having a regular arena hidden away somewhere is quite impossible. I repeat it, sir, quite impossible. But what is your evidence—that's what I want to get at—produce it, if you have any."

"The evidence, sir, is of a hearsay nature."

"Ah! That's just what I supposed: some foolish native story, I'll warrant!"

"Wait a moment, please; the evidence is, I say, of a hearsay nature, but of a kind that I have implicit confidence in."

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"Right you are, sir, and here's hoping that if they bore dug right under us they won't think it worth while to put dynamite in the tunnel and blow us all up, sir."

"Oh! They'll never do that."

"Why not, pray?"

"Why, don't you remember that old King, who was on the force two years ago, explained to us that the Chinese considered that a terrible waste of time and strength; just to dig a tunnel for the sake of blowing it up, even if it did send the 'foreign devil' with it into the air?"

"Yes, I believe he did, sir."

In accordance with the above agreement the native staff of officers and detectives was taken into consultation, but they didn't give the story much

how any human beings could have survived it, for it surely was worse than the old Black Hole of Calcutta in the days of the Mutiny."

"Dr. Bradlow of the Church Mission Hospital told me as how he believed they can get along with less fresh air than any human beings that ever lived. Says they not only close up all the windows in the hospital, but actually stuff up all the ventilators and air-holes with bits of paper, so that not a breath can get in."

"You're right, Bradlow, I don't believe our laws of life and oxygen apply to this portion of the human race. Well, as to this prize-fight story, I suggest we get the heads of the native staff upon it and see what they think of its possibilities."

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outline of this," remarked the Inspector as he rose and reached for his desk-pad, "and Captain Brownlow and I will talk it all over this evening. There may be something in it and there may not—"

Lord knows you can hear something new is going on in this queer land every day you live—but at any rate, we want you and all the good residents here to know that this Department is doing all in its power to keep the moral tone of the Island high. Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon and thank you," answered the reverend gentleman as he passed out into the court-yard.

That evening the two English heads of the police force spent a quiet but interesting hour in discussing the complaint of the Missionary and in wondering whether it could be possible that a contest of this kind had actually taken place in their midst and been so carefully hidden away from their eyes.

"Without the knowledge of the authorities," the Inspector, in his dilemma, naturally turned to his best and most helpful friend in the matter of unravelling crime, and so that evening found him by appointment in the upper room of No. 3-5 in the Red Cloud Alley, smoking a soothing cigarette in the arm-chair of the great Wang Foo, the Prince of Chinese Detectives.

"Wang Foo listened long and patiently to the Inspector's story, making his usual careful notes in the well-worn leather note-book from his sleeve."

"You are inclined, then," said the Inspector, "to place considerable credence in the Christian teacher's story?"

"Yes, decidedly," replied the detective, "I see, testimony of that kind is always of great value, because it is intentional. The passengers in the ad-

joining stateroom could have had no object in concocting a falsehood of that kind. It was simply a recalling of a scene of which one of them had been a spectator and which the other already knew about. What leaked out was simply what went through the cracks of the partition. There was unquestionably a fight, and a fight of a very brutal nature, accompanied by very heavy betting on the rival candidates. It also looks very much as if it was something that took place regularly, from the remarks, 'Twice in every month.' It is also very clear that it must have been in some place where foreign officers would have been liable to interfere, and of course this could not have been on native soil. However—"

here he spoke—very slowly and thoughtfully—"we have no right to immediately jump at the conclusion that it was in Hong Kong, for there are other possibilities. The Rev. Mr. Smalltree's criticism of your Department is therefore hasty and consequently quite unfair."

"I am glad to know you feel that way about it, Mr. Wang. It relieves my mind. People are very quick to accuse the police of negligence, when all the time we may be doing the very best we can, but we are simply groping in the dark."

"I quite understand that, Mr. Wallace. I have suffered from the same kind of criticism myself. Now, you will be good enough to let me have my usual ten days or two weeks to go into the matter thoroughly, and, in the meantime, if anything turns up, I will let you know. Venerable Grand One!" he cried to the aged mafiosi in the lower hall. "Renew the tea as the honorable guest departs. Old Chang!"

grasped the point and what his comment upon it would be.

"And you haven't been able to identify a single one of those who were present?" he asked.

"Not positively, but he alluded to one of them as 'sweetening' the wagers, which leads me to suspect a dealer in sugar."

The Abbot thought for a while and then said: "It is not likely that any one of them was new at the game, especially those who played the very large stakes. It must have been one who had learned the trick at the foreign horse races. We will inquire carefully tomorrow and see if we can trace any sugar merchant who won or who lost heavily at the native booth during the May season at the Happy Valley Course. This may give us a valuable clue."

"A brilliant thought, my Venerable Father," exclaimed Wang Foo, "and one well worthy of your careful and suggestive mind; we will act upon it without delay. Once having secured him, we can, by proper means, force out of him the names of others and then we shall be on the fair way to discover the 'Cripple' and the 'Pock-marked' and locate their secret meeting place."

They talked and talked well on into the night, but even with all the evidence they had, neither of them seemed to be satisfied in his own mind that the fight had actually taken place in the Colony. "It is too new, too new," repeated the Abbot, as he bowed his guest toward the door, "our people have their own vices, as we well know, and unfortunately they are learning others from the ocean-men (foreigners), but it is far too early in our his-

tory for them, I believe, to have gone into this sort of thing. Not yet, not yet—some day, perhaps. Alas! but not yet, thank the Buddha!"

A day or two's careful inquiry among the jockeys and pony-boys at the race course stables—made by Wang Foo in the disguise of a peddler of lottery tickets, or of which article they were liberal purchasers—revealed the fact that Hop Hoy, the sugar dealer, was the most liberal patron of the betting booth at the last Spring Meeting, and both Wang Foo and the Abbot felt sure enough of the identity to inveigle him into the Temple and there to apply the Chinese "third degree."

"Where did the prize-fight take place?" asked Wang, as he steered his wrists in his grasp of steel and looked straight into his startled eyes.

"What prize-fight?" exclaimed the astonished Hop Hoy. "Prize-fight? Why I never attended a prize-fight in my life. That is the ocean-man's game; we Chinese have no such vice."

"The prize-fight between a pock-marked man and a cripple," said the Detective, "you know, you watch, the one where you 'sugared' the pile with a thousand dollars. You know; out with it, quick!"

"A pock-marked man and a cripple? I do not know what you mean," he protested.

"Yes, the fight between 'Spotted Back' and 'Old Crooked Legs.' Where was it? Tell us quickly," interrupted the Abbot, "or by all the Buddhas, the vengeance of the Queen of Heaven will fall upon you."

"'Spotted Back' and 'Yellow Legs'!"

"That's all right, Mr. Wang. I'll be glad to see you again."

"Thank you most heartily, Mr. Wang," replied the Inspector, "I shall feel most happy, as the immortal Dickens said, always to have a cricket on my hearth."

"Answered the Disciple of Confucius, 'It is similar to the sentiment in the great Book of Poetry: 'Chirp! Chirp! Little visitor, Always welcome to our home!'

"Very cordially yours, 'Wang Foo.'"

"P. S.—You might include Lord Dubhine in the party if he is still in town."

It was just five minutes to twelve when Hop Hoy's famous Detective alighted from his sedan-chair, and passed into the private office of the Inspector. The invited guests were all there. It was easy to see that they were awaiting with the deepest interest to see what the outcome of the prize-fight in their midst, and were wondering at the audacity—even of Wang Foo with all his prestige—of transporting a criminal in an old-fashioned establishment like this to the streets of the civilized British Colony. He was formally introduced and arose to address them.

"The prisoner, the prisoner!" they all cried in unison.

"Yellow Legs and the cage! Where are they? Haven't you brought him?" eagerly inquired the Inspector, beginning to fear a disappointment.

"Gentlemen," said the Man of Mystery, with a sweeping gesture, he produced a little paper package from his silken sleeve, "behold the criminal and the prisoner!" He unwrapped before their astonished eyes a tiny willow cage, in it a yellow-legged chirping cricket.

"What means this pleasantry and why do you trifle with us this way?" asked the Governor as he arose and addressed Wang Foo.

"Your Excellency," replied the Detective with the most courteous of bows, "this is no pleasantry, it is the simple unvarnished truth. Listen to me, I beg you, for a moment. This whole thing is a mistake on the part of the mistake of applying a European conception to an Asiatic transaction. A contest of strength—a prize-fight if you wish so to call it—takes place in your midst and you spring at once to the conclusion that the combatants are of course human beings. This does not follow at all in China. I have listened carefully to every word of the evidence, and there is not a syllable from end to end that does not apply as well to an insect as to a man—read it over yourselves and acknowledge that I am correct."

"Every nation has its own form of prize-fighting, but in Sparta, in Persia, in Russia, in Egypt, in India, in China—everything from quadrupeds to insects—crickets in China, the last and least harmful of all. It is only in civilized and refined Europe and America that these brutalizing contests are taken part in by human beings."

"By Jove! You know, that is really most mysterious and interesting," was Lord Dubhine's response on behalf of the assembled company.

"Mr. Inspector," remarked Wang Foo, as he called at the office a few days after the denouement, "I want you to accept this little gift in memory of your first Chinese prize-fight unwrapping, as he spoke, a delicate package of yellow silk."

"What is it, pray?"

"It is a little incense-burner of bronze. You see, it is a cricket! And here are five sticks of incense—the sacred Chinese number of good luck—to go with it. One is inserted in either eye, one in his head, one in his mouth and one in the middle of his back. Light them one after a long and weary day's work and you will find them most refreshing. They will purify the atmosphere."

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